



CHILDREN'S LITERATURE THROUGH ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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Today's children, tomorrow's world are oft-repeated cliches, but very pertinent, particularly for a developing nation like ours. Investing in the development of our children today, with all the wisdom and resources at our command, catering to their emotional, physical and mental development is what is needed to achieve the desired end result—a country of well balanced, alert citizens.

A child reading a children's book is engaged in a solitary, one-to-one communication between minds, as one intelligent individual addressing another. It is a very personal experience for the child. However, a child watching television is an

entirely different matter. TV programmes have to have a certain amount of low level homogeneity because they cater to a vast viewership which comprises the ignorant, intelligent and super-intelligent. It reaches them at one go, regardless—and don't forget—at an age, when youngsters are most receptive. That makes it all the more necessary to appreciate the vitality, dynamism and impact of the audio-visual medium of communication. Our country sadly lacks the facilities for keeping children usefully amused in their spare time. They are left with little option or no option but to watch TV, whether the programmes be good, bad or indifferent. It is the responsi-

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bility of the powers that be to make sure that only good and suitable programmes are shown, and it is the responsibility of writers for children to see that there is abundance of suitable material to choose from.

I was involved in the making of a 13-episode children's serial, based on my own published short stories last year. I gave what I thought was the right thing for them, a positive moral conveyed in an entertaining manner. Judging from the feed-back, I can say that they went off well with the viewers, both young and old. It was an exciting and rewarding experience for me, and I learnt a lot in the process of writing screen-plays and directing. I would like to share my observations with this august audience, for whatever they are worth.

There is a belief that watching TV is bad for children. By and large, I endorse this view, looking at the superficiality of the programmes shown on our small screen. Those responsible must raise their perception of their audience and give due credit to their intelligence. We must realize that only the very best is good enough for our children, and they are not a target for exploitation. I think I was able to give my best because of my total involvement with the challenging venture. I treated the making of these programmes as a grand enterprise and enjoyed it.

It is tougher to make a children's programme than one for adults because of special constraints regarding concept, approach, treatment, pace, handling content etc. I would like to share with all of you how I went about facing these.

When you are making a programme for children, the inevitable question is, "where is the message?" All good cinema should say something and particularly children's cinema, but one has to be subtle. I

realised that if the message is put across compulsively, children get put off immediately. There was no question of the moral not being implicit, but it had to be through a process of identification, incidents, characterisation etc. The end result is, of course, very important, but achieving participation of the young viewer by stirring power of thought and feeling is the best method of achieving that goal.

Preaching and moralising are insulting to the viewer as you are denying him the right to his own opinion and conclusions. To illustrate the point, I recall the episode in my serial "Chand Sitare" on the theme of "conquering fear of the dark." Most children believe that witches and devils lurk in graveyards and shady corners, and to them, the fear is real. The episode was developed in such a way that viewers identified with the hero and suffered the humiliation resulting from this fear. But when he conquered that fear and rose above it, many children were deeply gratified and conveyed to me that they felt it was their personal conquest. How thrilling and elevating it was to know that my handling of the theme had the desired impact! To most grown-ups, a child is a small adult, but it is not so really. A child's problems and perceptions are different, and this fact must be appreciated.

I had picked up themes from day to day happenings in the lives of children. A fete at school, a longing for a puppy all one's own, the plethora of lies one gets caught up in after telling just one small lie, attachment to an old rag-doll and so on. Having a plausible back-drop where incidents could take place, e.g., a class room, playground or backyard, would have helped make identification easier. I was lucky on this score, because I was able to shoot in and around the very bungalow that was my home, when these stories were conceived and written. The atmosphere was

very plausible right through, and this enhanced naturalness. I was lucky with the school scenes as well, as I had the entire school with its class rooms, corridors, playground, tuck shop etc. at my disposal. Even the fete scenes were shot at an actual fete organised by the school on its premises. But for this facility, the episodes would never have looked half so real. These factors contributed to a sense of reality which helped hold the children's interest.

Another basic principle is to pick characters that would be easily accepted by the child. A sympathetic aunt, a doting grandfather, loving parents, a cantankerous or quaint teacher, a jolly uncle, a funny friend, a devoted pet are some examples of characters a child comes across in his daily life. Personally, I am absolutely against villainy, violence and abuse, as the main traits in any character. It would frighten a child and destroy his/her vision of life. Emotions of love, compassion, and caring would be annihilated and surely we want to highlight those! This was very well brought out in 'Saboo' in which the little hero is sick and lonesome and longs to possess a puppy for company and to shower love and affection on. The success of episode can be judged from this incident. A boy living next door would never step out of his flat if our door was open, for fear of confronting our pair of dogs that barked at everybody. Wonder of wonders, after he saw the episode, he wanted a puppy of his own!

I discovered, during previews of my episodes, that children like movement on the screen far more than listening to dialogues. So I kept the spoken word easy, simple and minimal. If you stick to spoken language, you would not go wrong. Your product would be understood and absorbed. Just as it is important to have natural situations, it is also important to have natural dialogues. Language used should

not be filmi and ostentatious, but what is used in everyday life. It is best to stick to how the child next-door speaks.

Almost all my artists were non-professional with one inevitable exception where the role was very demanding. I am generally apprehensive about casting professional children because they are always highly stylised. But in this case, luckily all went well, and I felt flattered when the artist's mother remarked at the end of the day, "Guddu has had a picnic today." You see, she had mouthed no outlandish dialogues, nor been a part of unnatural situations; as in *masala* films that she acted in everyday. She gave an outstanding performance.

Children love fantasy, adventure and intrigue. A programme incorporating these would naturally be of interest to them. I realised it was quite in order to let one's imagination fly, so long as it was within the understood perimeters of the child's perceptions. The kind of imagination a child has is lost all too soon, he grows up so fast. We should let him make the most of it, only keep in mind that in programmes with a substantial fantasy, contact with reality must be lost in order to maintain a child's involvement with what is happening. I got a very good feed-back vis-a-vis one programme in which the little girl talks to her favourite rag-doll, and the doll talks back to her. It was accepted by young viewers, though some adults may find it unreal.

We had another exciting episode in which two boys go on a treasure hunt. A cluster of concrete block change into maze of mini apartments, and ruins transform into a castle. The children not only accepted these imaginary transformations, but found them exciting and general fun.

And do not forget to make the young viewer laugh. It is necessary to put in a sprinkling of humour be it slap-stick or

